

By Derek Wallbank, *MinnPost*

Rep. Betty McCollum has asked House appropriators to approve five times more money to fix federally managed Indian schools than President Obama requested in a bid to dramatically slice the time it would take for the more than 60 schools in poor or worse condition to come up to acceptable standards.

One third of the schools managed by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) - including Bug-O-Nay-Ge Shig in Bena, Minn. - are rated in poor physical condition. Circle of Life in White Earth was rated in even worse condition - listed back in 2004 as among the 14 schools most in need of having facilities replaced.

It takes between \$15 million and \$50 million to replace a school entirely, according to BIE spokeswoman Nedra Darling, and Obama's Indian schools construction budget calls for \$52.8 million to be spent in fiscal 2011. At that funding level, it would take about 30 years to fix them all, according to Sen. Byron Dorgan, chairman of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee.

McCollum's request, detailed in a letter to the head of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, is for \$263 million.

"We need to be on a trajectory to actually making sure that schools get fixed," said Bill Harper, McCollum's chief of staff, adding that schools have been "just treading water" because of inadequate funding for years.

Addressing the backlog

Having 63 Indian schools out of the 183 under BIE control in "poor" physical condition is hardly cause for celebration, though officials note it is a sign of progress. Ten years ago, there were more than 120 on that list.

Over the past 10 years, more than \$1.3 billion has been allocated for Indian school construction, including about \$250 million under the stimulus law. So while Obama's request this year is half of what was budgeted last year, officials point to the stimulus funds as evidence that more money is actually being spent to build schools.

"The president's FY 2011 budget requests reflects the work accomplished in the past 10 years as well as the on-going work funded by the Recovery Act and other competing funding needs across Indian Country," said Nedra Darling, spokeswoman for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. "Indian Affairs supports the president's FY 2011 budget request. Should the Congress through the annual appropriation for FY 2011 provide additional funds, Indian Affairs would follow the direction of the Congress in executing the program."

McCollum's funding request came in consultation with the National Indian Education Association, which has long lobbied for more money for Indian schools. The inadequate physical structures are part of the reason, they say, that three quarters of Indian schools fail to meet federal testing standards. Three of the four Indian schools in Minnesota failed to meet those standards last year.

"It is unjust to expect our students to succeed academically when we fail to provide them with a proper environment to achieve success," Patricia Whitefoot, president of the National Indian Education Association, said in an interview earlier this year.

Progress and process

McCollum is the only Minnesotan on the House Appropriations or Budget committees, meaning she'll play the state's largest role in crafting the legislation that outlines how every cent in Washington gets spent. Hearings on her request and others in the appropriations bill will begin in May.

"We need to get at the backlog of this," Harper said.

One bright spot on the Indian schools construction horizon may be at Circle of Life School in White Earth. It will take an estimated \$15.6 million to replace facilities at that school, \$1.7 million of which has already been earmarked for advanced planning and design costs.

It has been years of delay - the Interior Department's budget justification report to Congress notes that work on Circle of Life was originally scheduled to have been finished this year - but construction is expected to finally begin later this year, Darling said.

Barring any further delay, officials expect construction to be finished and the school to be in well-above acceptable condition by the time classes begin in 2012.